



# Self construction and Communication Path of Media Image of Village Cadres in Rural Short Videos -Taking "Tomato Secretary Chen Baochao" as an example

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**Abstract.** In 2017, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the strategy of rural revitalization. At the same time, the accessibility, participation, and convenience of short videos have made the public aware that new media can play an important role in bridging the "last mile" of rural revitalization strategies. More and more people are joining in the creation of rural short videos, including village cadres stationed at the grassroots level. This study takes "Tomato Secretary" Chen Baochao as an example to analyze the visible phenomenon of rural cadres actively using short video platforms to seek their own image, and to play the main role of rural cadres on short video platforms in comprehensively promoting rural revitalization. Not only does it provide reference for rural cadres to break free from the label of "stigmatization" and reshape their media image, but it also helps rural revitalization and promotes the construction of digital countryside and digital China.

**Keywords:** short videos; Rural cadres; Media image.

## 1 Introduction

At present, there are 690000 administrative villages and over 500 million farmers in China. Although they have achieved great success in decades, there is still a significant gap between them and cities in terms of industrial development and resident income. Issues such as rural labor loss, extensive development methods, and backward education levels have attracted people's attention. In addition, village cadres, as leaders in leading farmers out of poverty and becoming prosperous, have been criticized for their behavior in recent years, leading to issues of corruption and abuse of power that cannot be ignored in the cadre team. After these pieces of information were disseminated on social media, they had a negative impact on village cadres due to lax control, fast dissemination speed, and sensational content, leading to the stigmatization of the image of the village cadre group, and the overall evaluation of the village cadre group by public opinion was not ideal. <sup>[1]</sup>

The 52nd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released in 2023 shows that by June 2023, the number of short video users has reached 1.026 billion,

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accounting for 95.2% of the total Internet users, of which the number of rural Internet users in China has also reached 301 million, accounting for 27.9% of the total Internet users. <sup>[2]</sup>Rural short videos are not just an external form of information that appeals to the visual and auditory senses. They can stimulate the development momentum and external resource coordination of rural areas in a deeper sense, and are a new means of development. <sup>[3]</sup> As of June 2021, Tiktok's rural videos have received 12.9 billion praise in a year, and the income of rural video creators has increased 15 times year-on-year. <sup>[4]</sup> Rural cadres, as important executors of implementing the rural revitalization strategy. Rural grassroots cadres generally open cultural and tourism government accounts in Tiktok and use Tiktok to promote local tourism resources. They have gained some attention and praise by building emotional links, their own discourse system and common meaning space. <sup>[5]</sup>They actively seek a group outlet through short video platforms, break free from the label of "stigmatization", and help rural revitalization with a more positive stance. However, current research on this group is clearly insufficient. This leads to the core question of this study: what kind of media image has village cadres constructed? How to obtain visible images?

This study selects the short video practice of Chen Baochao, a typical figure of rural cadres, as a sample for analysis, to examine the process of media image self construction of rural cadres. This study selects 71 short videos published by Tiktok account "Tomato Secretary Chen Baochao" as of February 8, 2024 to study the image characteristics of rural cadres presented by the short video account. This study referred to the category setting and encoding method of "rural image" short videos by researchers such as Cheng Meihua and Lu Mengyao. <sup>[6]</sup>This study divided the video into six encoding dimensions: video theme, emotional color, presentation method, video text expression, language, and clothing for analysis. Different encoding items were further subdivided under each category.

## **2 Deconstruction: Rural Cadres Actively "Showcase" and Break Stereotypes**

New media technology has broken the monopoly of media power, making it possible for any organization and individual to be seen, especially with the emergence of short videos, providing them with more possibilities. It has enabled more groups and individuals to realize the "right to be seen," "the right to be seen in their own way," and "the right to see others and other things." The essence of self construction of the media image of rural cadres is to use short video platforms to grasp the discourse power of shaping the image, consciously or unconsciously use some techniques to present oneself, create impressions, and make the public change their views on themselves. This study encoded and statistically analyzed 71 short video samples, and obtained the respective proportions of 20 subcategories under 7 main categories(see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Encoding Table for Short Video Content Analysis of Rural Cadre Image

Category	Subclass	Data proportion
Video Theme	Life Record: Real Work and Daily Life of Rural Cadres	59.15%
	Plot emotion: Artistic creation and arrangement based on reality, with performance traces but able to convey certain emotions	7.04%
	Production and manufacturing: related to agricultural and rural production activities	29.58%
	Popular Science Knowledge: Agricultural and Rural Knowledge Popularization	4.23%
	Positive: It conveys values such as perseverance, diligence, and competence	22.54%
Emotional color	Neutral: Objectively state facts	77.46%
	Negative: The manifestation of some negative and pessimistic emotions	0%
Presentation method	Live shooting: Follow up on site	46.48%
	Camera presentation: There are obvious traces of artistic creation	50.7%
Video text expression	Photo+text/material splicing	2.82%
	Describe and summarize	100%
	Beautiful writing	0%
Language	Beautiful writing mandarin	4.23%
	dialect	92.96%
Dressing and dressing up	No language	2.82%
	Ordinary clothing: daily life attire	66.2%
	Specific clothing: deliberate dressing up	21.13%
Comment oriented	Positive: positive, supportive	61.97%
	Neutral: No obvious emotional preference	36.62%
	Negative: Negative views	1.41%

Through statistical analysis of the basic data in the previous text, it can be found that "Tomato Secretary" is no longer confined to the traditional image of cadres in daily life and work, but gradually outlines a new image, mainly reflected in three aspects: scene, content, and character design.

**2.1 Scene Construction: Presenting a Real Rural Landscape**

The shaping of character images not only involves describing individual characters, but also starting from the environment to create and highlight the character's personality. In the past, rural short videos carefully created a beautiful countryside in people's hearts by selecting beautiful venues, designing beautifully composed images, and deliberately embellishing costumes, supplemented by touching copy, making rural life poetic and idealized. But over time, this style and route cannot truly touch audiences

who have had rural life experiences, which is not in line with their memories of the countryside.

Farmers have a comfortable leisure in their lives, but more of it is the hustle and bustle of labor. In the account of "Tomato Secretary" Chen Baochao, the selection of video themes related to production and manufacturing activities accounts for 29.58%, ranking second. The filming scene he chose went to every street in the countryside, to the fields, and to the midst of the farmers. In the early stage of the account shooting, the protagonist usually appears on camera and goes all the way to the end. Throughout the process, one person is in a field greenhouse to tell the audience about the hard work of the villagers, while introducing the advantages of the village's agricultural products. Sometimes, even the protagonist holds the camera and takes photos, with some blurry pixels. As the filming continued, the account received a good response, adding more elements to his videos, such as emphasizing the effect of the video cover, no longer shooting from one shot to the bottom, post editing, and adding empty shots when the protagonist introduced, significantly improving the quality of the entire short video. Although the shooting of the account still appears rough and simple, it can highlight the real daily life of rural cadres.

## **2.2 Content Design: Adhere to the Action Concept of "Putting Farmers at the Center"**

Respecting the needs of farmers and safeguarding their interests has always been the action guide for rural cadres. Rural revitalization requires industrial revitalization, but not just industrial prosperity. It includes both the economy and society, but fundamentally, people. Therefore, rural cadres should use digitalization to reshape their own image and better lead farmers to achieve rural revitalization. The first step should be to start with "putting farmers at the center".

From the classification of the video themes on the "Tomato Secretary" account alone, it is enough to see the weight of farmers in it. The so-called life documentary refers to cadres helping farmers solve various problems in their lives, such as visiting and paying attention to the five guarantees and difficult households in the village during extremely cold weather, urging and helping two aunties pay medical insurance, and learning and researching advanced rural experiences in various regions; Although the plot emotions are based on certain artistic creations, they are also based on the fundamental interests of farmers and convey correct legal concepts. For example, the short video about "refusing gambling" that appeared twice on the account strongly warned villagers to "stay away from gambling and cherish a better life" during the Chinese New Year; Production and manufacturing use themselves as spokespersons to personally assist the pillar industries of the village; The theme of popular science knowledge is also to explain knowledge about tomato cultivation to the audience, focusing on the outstanding advantages of tomatoes in the village, with the essential purpose of driving economic production in the village.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, there are significant differences in video production between the early and later stages of an account. The early video presentation was slightly monotonous, while the later video added BGM, text, transitions, special

effects, and internet memes. The addition of these elements is more in line with the dissemination pattern of short videos, making it easier for the audience to accept relatively single rural cadre short videos. For example, the contrast reflected in short videos such as "comparison vs. comparison" is more popular among audiences, and the "Tomato Secretary" account has followed the trend to create a "what you think is the daily life of village cadres vs. the actual daily life of village cadres". However, the application of such internet memes may also have the opposite effect, such as integrating "Q&A" into videos and answering questions that people are more concerned about, such as "what is the salary of a village branch secretary", "does a village branch secretary have social security", and "why do people rush to become a village branch secretary". These questions have indeed attracted public attention and curiosity, but they are also controversial and can easily have a counterproductive effect when discussed in public. From the video comment orientation, it can be seen that the "Tomato Secretary" account's comment orientation is mostly positive and neutral, with negative views accounting for only 1.41%. This is due to the negative impact of this short video, so rural cadres still need to be cautious if they want to surf the online world!

### **2.3 Image Reconstruction: Character Description and Sovereignty Return**

As Zhou Baohua once said, visibility was only a right and power enjoyed by a few people. With the progress of society and media technology, visibility has become an accessible right for the general public. However, although migrant workers are concerned by public opinion, they are not seen in their own way. <sup>[7]</sup>The same goes for rural cadres, who do not express their subjectivity in the process of being seen. Therefore, what they need is not only to be seen as objects of social controversy, but also to participate in the dissemination process, set public issues, and return the discourse power of the image of rural cadres to the hands of the group.

The shaping of character images usually starts from both the external and internal aspects of the character. The external aspect can be divided into the character's appearance and language, while the internal aspect can be judged from the character's personality. From the table, it can be seen that "Tomato Secretary" tends to dress more in ordinary clothing, with deliberate attire accounting for only 21.33%. In terms of language selection, the videos in the account are mostly in dialects, accounting for 92.96%. Rural cadres naturally have their own considerations when choosing dialects. When communicating with villagers in daily life, rural cadres use dialects, and the front-end presentation is more realistic, which can bring them closer to the local audience, highlight regional characteristics, and sound very friendly. Moreover, in the later stages of the account, there is often a form of dialogue between characters, which is more lively and lively compared to the past when the protagonist speaks alone to the camera. Rural cadres have made significant breakthroughs in venturing into the field of short videos in the face of a shortage of new media resources and talent. In the video of "Tomato Secretary" Chen Baochao, one can feel his strong rural atmosphere, which not only highlights the new style brought about by rural development and social change. In the past, rural cadres who were known to the public were

portrayed as "domineering", "overeating", and "superficially skilled" with a vicious and vicious negative image. However, "Tomato Secretary" displayed filial piety, bravery, diligence, gentleness, kindness, and humorous personality traits. 22.54% of the videos conveyed positive and positive values. Through this "persona", more persuasive values can be conveyed to villagers, expressing beautiful qualities and leaving a profound and brand new image of rural cadres. Other people who are also rural cadres can also be educated through empathy when watching such videos.

### **3 Reconstruction: a Feasible Path for the New Media Image Communication of Rural Cadres**

#### **3.1 Local Social Collaboration for Precise Audience Positioning**

The capital realization of internet celebrity traffic often has the characteristic of traffic extraction. Although it can be quickly realized, this model is also the sword of the protagonist's Damocles, which can be destroyed if not careful. The characteristics of authenticity, virtuality, fluidity, isolation, and connectivity in cyberspace have subverted the ways of interaction in interpersonal communication.<sup>[8]</sup> If the media image of rural cadres wants to continue to develop healthily, it must restrain the logic of disorderly reproduction, embed it into local networks and human nature, and the local audience is the root of its development.

Due to the convenience and representativeness of the identity of "Tomato Secretary" as a rural cadre, the strong support of the local village government, and timely promotion by mainstream media, the short videos of "Tomato Secretary" have systematically entered the local audience's vision step by step. The audience that can be reached through official intervention is limited, but the first group of audiences, after seeing the content published by mainstream media, spontaneously spread the information out of pride and excitement. Although this interpersonal communication has a relatively small impact, it is a high-quality communication activity based on the strong bidirectional nature, timely feedback, and high frequency of interaction between the transmitter and receiver. Especially CCTV News, "Hello, I am Chen Baochao from Lankao..." The release of tweets further enhances the pride of local people. As a rural cadre, the most important audience is the local farmers, followed by residents from nearby counties and cities. The ideal situation is to have access to users from all over the country. The two waves of promotion by "Tomato Secretary" have made the audience aware of the existence of such a character, after all, with the support of heavyweight media such as CCTV News. However, for ordinary rural cadres, achieving the third goal is somewhat difficult, but with the help of local media, they can already accurately target the first two audiences. Therefore, for the promotion of rural cadres at the local level, it is necessary to pay sufficient attention to the human resources of the local society. In some cases, this kind of social network can play an unexpected role.

### 3.2 Media Empowerment to Strengthen the Image of Rural Cadres

As mentioned above, with the effectiveness of official intervention and interpersonal communication, the public can establish a self-awareness, diligence, and practical image of rural cadres in their minds. The role of emerging media is to strengthen this perception and reshape the media image of rural cadres. Zeng Gotita proposed that mass media reconstructs people's daily lives, even their emotional world and ideology, by influencing their political life and values. <sup>[9]</sup>

This study suggests that the participatory expression and emotional identification of the audience obtained by the "Tomato Secretary" IP through short videos is essentially a social relationship, namely the relationship of attention, consumption, appreciation, etc. established between individuals. <sup>[10]</sup> The comments and forwarding of "Tomato Secretary" short videos can be considered as the social connection and resource empowerment of rural areas, embedding resources into relationships and achieving relationship empowerment. Only when the value of content production is empowered by these "relationships" can the value of content be reflected and processed.

In addition, more and more people want to achieve monetization through the use of short video platforms. In this context, there have emerged shop exploration experts who are between "internet celebrities" and "digital workers", infiltrating all aspects of local life services. Upon careful investigation, it can be found that the users who watch the videos of the influencers of exploring stores are in line with the audience sought after by rural cadres to a certain extent. The fan base of the influencers of exploring stores is large, with high verticality and strong stickiness. Therefore, cooperation with the influencers of exploring stores is beneficial for expanding the scope of influence on the image of rural cadres. The "Tomato Secretary" keenly perceives the development potential behind the combination of "exploring the store" and "agriculture, rural areas, and farmers". He collaborates with well-known local experts such as "exploring Kaifeng (with 57.4 million fans)," Little Stone in Kaifeng (with 26.8 million fans), and "11 Eating Full" (with 7.9 million fans) to promote tomatoes in Baiyun Mountain Village and saline alkali land. By comparing the videos of the three experts mentioned above, it can be observed that while introducing the development of the rural tomato industry, they all emphasize the role played by celebrity secretaries. The numerous short videos once again strengthen the new media image of "Tomato Secretary", who is hardworking, friendly and caring for the people. The media empowers and drives the main body to participate in rural revitalization, achieving the transformation of rural cadres from "passive involvement" to "active intervention".

## 4 Conclusion

There is a "trust crisis" in the public opinion of village cadres, which makes many talented and young people unwilling to return to the village to contribute, making it difficult to achieve rural revitalization. Without good development conditions, it is even more difficult to attract talents to return to the village and promote rural development. Rural cadres are also affected by negative evaluations, which affects their work enthusiasm. If this vicious cycle is allowed to continue, the development of rural

areas will remain stagnant. Rural cadres cannot rely on the outside world to improve the current situation. To correct the stigmatization of the rural cadre group and reshape the media image, they should play a more subjective role, including using short video platforms to shape and disseminate images, strengthening interaction and communication, using public opinion guidance to shape positive images, establishing and improving information dissemination mechanisms, and cultivating their own new media literacy. By implementing these paths, rural cadres can better shape and disseminate their image, enhance public awareness and trust, and thereby promote the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

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